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The Trip

by Arnold Barnes

The three of us were inseparable. Fraternal twin brothers and a cousin. We formed a trio that played together, lived together, and yes, fought together, throughout our formative and adolescent years. Essentially, we were the same age. A bare four months separated us. Cornell and Cordell Barnes arrived on November 14, 1922. I arrived on March 12, 1923.

In the eyes of some neighbors and many kin folks, we were little hellions. Indeed, an adult cousin was heard to remark, "Separated, they are pretty good boys. Together, they are the meanest three kids in the world!" In the eyes of our parents, we were their "fine little fellers." In our own eyes and thoughts, we only aggravated those who annoyed us.

We grew up in the community of Babbs Switch, about half way between Hobart and Roosevelt, in Kiowa County, Oklahoma. We attended historic Babbs Memorial School, a one room brick school through the eighth grade. During these years, we learned the three R's along with a fascination for geography. We made good use of the well-worn and dog-eared *National Geographic* magazines in our small library. Indeed, we wanted to grow up to be world travelers; however, our world was essentially limited to Kiowa county. During those days of the Great Depression, money was scarce and there were no provisions for traveling.

We shared an insatiable curiosity. We had a compulsion to experiment and explore. We wanted to know what lay on the other side of the mountain. We walked the ridges and climbed the granite Wichita mountains. We investigated the sites of deserted homesteads and found many items of interest to us. When the home-

steads pulled stakes, they left behind numerous objects which caught our fancy. All these adventures led to new experiences, and brought on other dreams and wishes to explore and investigate. They led to our first ride on a train.

We lived near a railroad track. For many years, we watched the trains as they passed through the community. The Frisco was a branch line whose route was from Enid, Oklahoma to Vernon, Texas. The traffic was heavy during wheat harvest with several freight trains a day, all pulled by steam engines. Frequently, they would stop at Babbs Switch to pick up cars loaded with wheat and leave empty ones in their place. Passenger service was the "Dummy," which consisted of a combination engine and baggage car pulling a single passenger car. Every now and then, the Dummy's diesel engine would be replaced by a steam locomotive pulling a mail/baggage car and a day coach.

We loved those steam engines. We would hear one coming from far away and rush toward the track to wave at the engineer and crew. There were times they would give us a special toot on the whistle. This was an exceptional treat and delight.

When we were about twelve years old, it occurred to us that while we had watched those trains for many years, we had never ridden one. We started making our plans to ride the Dummy from the Switch to Hobart, a distance of about six miles. If the economy was favorable, each of us received an allowance of twenty five cents (two bits) on Saturday. We could attend a shoot-em-up movie for a dime and buy a large sack of popcorn for a nickel. With the remaining ten cents, we could indulge ourselves to a red Nehi soda pop and either a peanut patty or a Baby Ruth candy bar.

In our planning we decided that we could forego the soda pop in exchange for the train ride. The fare from

the Switch to Hobart was six cents, providing one was less than twelve years old! For those twelve or older, the cost was a dime. The answer was simple. We would lie about our age and save the extra money. We would ride the Dummy to Hobart, and meet our families that afternoon for a ride home.

The designated Saturday morning arrived. We prevailed on Matt Braun, owner of the store at the Switch, to flag the Dummy down. The conductor appeared at the rear of the car with his boarding step in hand. He gave Matt a scornful look and was obviously annoyed when three young boys were all that boarded. There were a number of people seated in the coach and we made our way to seats across the aisle from a friendly man and woman who had two children with them. The man had tickets in his hat band. I had read that this was the mark of a seasoned rail traveler.

As the train started to move, we looked out the window. It seemed that the elevators were moving and we were sitting still. We heard the whistle, or horn blow. From inside the train, it sounded like the bray of a jack-ass from far away. We were on our way! As we picked up speed, the telegraph poles flicked by faster and faster. We must have been travelling at least thirty miles an hour!

The conductor made his way down the aisle to our seat. He had on the usual railroad attire, including the flat-topped cap with the badge "Frisco" pinned in front. He had on a coat and vest. It appeared that all pockets on both garments were stuffed and bulging with various papers and other type items.

Still grumpy from having made the flag stop, he asked, "Where ye boys goin'?"

When we answered, he seemed even more grumpy. He pulled a pad of tickets from one of the stuffed pockets and proceeded to tear off three.

"Gimme yer money," he growled.

Timidly, three little hands came forth, each offering six cents. He looked at the money with scorn and disgust.

"How old are ye boys?" he snorted.

The moment of truth, or untruth, had arrived!

In unison we answered "Eleven."

Then, I volunteered, "We'll be twelve our next birthday."

Again the snort.

"Aha, triplets, eh?" He spat out the words. "Ain't never seen no triplets afore. Ye look older 'nuff to vote now."

With a grunt of disgust, and still peering at us over metal rimmed spectacles, he pocketed the eighteen cents. With considerable ceremony, he punched the tickets, and went back to his seat, still muttering to himself.

Across the aisle, the veteran traveller was grinning from ear to ear.

"We'd better hurry and get to town," he laughed, "Or you fellers will be having a birthday."

Adapted from the book *Short Grass and Red Dirt* by Arnold Barnes.

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